



The Knight

In the 'General Prologue' to The Canterbury Tales Chaucer provides descriptions of some of the pilgrims. The texts are given in a modern English version, since Chaucer's language is quite difficult to understand for contemporary readers of English. The text below presents the readers with the first pilgrim of the whole party.

Geoffrey Chaucer
The Canterbury Tales
(ca 1387-1400)
General Prologue

There was a Knight, a most distinguished man,
Who from the day on which he first began
To ride abroad¹ had followed chivalry,
Truth, honour, generousness and courtesy,
5 He had done nobly in his sovereign's war
And ridden into battle, no man more,
As well in Christian as in heathen² places,
And ever honoured for his noble graces.
When we took Alexandria³, he was there.
10 He often sat at table in the chair
Of honour, above all nations, when in Prussia.
In Lithuania he had ridden, and Russia,
No Christian man so often, of his rank⁴.
When, in Granada, Algeciras⁵ sank
15 Under assault, he had been there, and in
North Africa, raiding Benamarin⁶,
In Anatolia he had been as well
And fought when Ayas⁷ and Attalia⁸ fell,
For all along the Mediterranean coast
20 He had embarked with many a noble host⁹.
In fifteen mortal battles he had been
And jousted¹⁰ for our faith at Tramissene¹¹
Thrice in the lists¹², and always killed his man.
This same distinguished knight had led the van¹³
25 Once with the Bey of Balat¹⁴, doing work
For him against another heathen Turk;
He was of sovereign value in all eyes.
And though so much distinguished, he was wise
And in his bearing¹⁵ modest as a maid.
30 He never yet a boorish¹⁶ thing had said
In all his life to any, come what might;
He was a true a perfect gentle-knight.
Speaking of his equipment, he possessed
Fine horses, but he was not gaily dressed.
35 He wore a fustian¹⁷ tunic stained¹⁸ and dark
With smudges¹⁹ where his armour had left mark;
Just home from service, he had joined our ranks
To do his pilgrimage and render thanks.

- 1 abroad. *Qui*: fuori dal suo paese, in giro.
- 2 heathen. Pagani.
- 3 Alexandria. Alessandria d'Egitto, occupata dai Saraceni e liberata nel 1365 da un esercito cristiano comandato dal re di Cipro, Pietro di Lusignano.
- 4 rank. Rango.
- 5 Algeciras. Città della Spagna sul golfo dominato dalla rocca di Gibilterra, fu difesa nel 1344 contro l'esercito moresco del re di Granada.
- 6 Benamarin. Regno del Nord Africa.
- 7 Ayas. Città dell'Armenia conquistata dai cristiani nel 1367.
- 8 Attalia. In Turchia, conquistata dai cristiani nel 1361.
- 9 host. Schiera, esercito.
- 10 jousted. Aveva partecipato ad un torneo, combattendo con la lancia a cavallo.
- 11 Tramissene. Tlemcen in Algeria, un tempo roccaforte berbera.
- 12 lists. Arene per competizioni cavalleresche.
- 13 had led the van. Aveva combattuto in prima fila.
- 14 Bey of Balat. Sultano turco, una volta alleato dei cristiani.
- 15 bearing. Portamento.
- 16 boorish. Volgare.
- 17 fustian. Di fustagno.
- 18 stained. Macchiata.
- 19 smudges. Sbavature, macchie.

**READING COMPETENCE****1 READ the text and do the activities below.****1 Find the words in the text which mean the following.**

- 1 polite behaviour
- 2 virtues
- 3 surrendered
- 4 well-known because of success
- 5 having good judgement
- 6 brightly, showily

2 Read the first four lines again and write down what values the Knight is associated with.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

3 Read the full text again and, with the help of the footnotes, fill in the blanks with the military campaigns the Knight had fought during his long career both in Christian and pagan lands.

He had fought in the battle of **(1)** in Egypt in 1365 where he had conquered the town. He had defeated the peoples of **(2)** Europe gaining the highest place at the table of the winners. He had defended **(3)** against the Moorish army of the king of Granada in 1344. He had been in **(4)** and attacked the kingdom of **(5)** He had also fought in **(6)** and had been at **(7)** in Turkey in 1361, and at **(8)** in **(9)** in 1367. He had defended the Christian faith at **(10)** in Northern Africa.

4 Why does Chaucer insist so much on the list of the places where the Knight had been?

- A Because it emphasises his love for travelling.
- B Because he wants to show his knowledge of geography.
- C Because it qualifies the Knight as wholly professional and gives his profession religious overtones.

5 Read the notes and match the names of three common activities a knight was engaged in during the Middle Ages with their descriptions. How many of these had the Knight experienced?

- | | |
|----------------------|--|
| 1 mortal battle | A fight on horseback with lances |
| 2 joust | B duel between the champions of opposing armies to decide the victory in a battle whose result was uncertain |
| 3 to be in the lists | C the challenge between two knights in an arena with a barrier in the middle |

6 Tick the details Chaucer gives about the Knight's appearance. Then answer the question below.

- ☐ His behaviour.
- ☐ His clothes.
- ☐ His equipment.
- ☐ His body.
- ☐ His face.

Why does he include the detail of the horses?

7 What idea does the description of the Knight's clothes suggest?

- A He was interested in the chivalric values rather than in appearance and clothing.
- B Though worthy, he was poor.
- C He had had no time to change clothes before going on the pilgrimage.

8 Choose the correct option as regards the rhyme scheme.

- A ABBA.
- B ABAB.
- C AABB.



9 Write the word, which is repeated thirteen times, employed by Chaucer to add one detail to another.

10 The aim of this device is to

- A avoid monotony.
- B obtain a pleasant musical effect.
- C emphasise an idea.

11 'modest as a maid' (line 29) is a

- A metaphor.
- B simile.
- C symbol.

12 The word 'ranks' (line 37) means

- A a group of people.
- B a military formation.
- C a social position.

13 Describe Chaucer's attitude towards the Knight and the values he represents.

14 Complete the summary with the words from the box.

chivalric

banquet

prizes

polite

tunic

stained

battlefield

fought



The Knight had **(1)** in many battles and had ridden in all of Christendom and Heathendom. He had also won some **(2)** or a place of honour at the victory **(3)** The Knight was a **(4)** and generous man and he had never said anything rude in all his life. Even though he had a beautiful horse, he was wearing a **(5)** that was still **(6)** with the blood of his last battle. He had probably ridden straight off the **(7)** to join the group of pilgrims. In *The Canterbury Tales*, the Knight represents the **(8)** ideals of the past and a section of the nobility destined to disappear or turn into a new social class, the country gentry.